Justice and Mr. Sessions

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IN ONE OF his last acts before leaving office, Attorney General William P. Barr made public a harsh denunciation of the director of the FBI, William S. Sessions. The unpleasant scent of a vendetta hangs over this affair.

The Justice Department's much-leaked-about inquiry into Mr. Sessions's ethical conduct has culminated in a long and scathing report by its Office of Professional Responsibility, which Mr. Barr released on Tuesday with his own memo to Mr. Sessions accepting its findings and ordering him to conform to its recommendations. If the report is correct in its account of the facts, Mr. Sessions ought to resign. But Mr. Sessions says that it contains many errors and that it was made public without giving him a chance to reply. Mr. Barr's successor will have to decide, without wasting much time about it, who's telling the truth.

The department's report says that Mr. Sessions repeatedly used FBI aircraft to visit his children on trips arranged with only the most minimal relation to public business. Mr. Sessions replies that he travels by government aircraft at Mr. Barr's order and that all trips at government expense are cleared by the bureau's lawyers. The investigators say that Mr. Sessions won't show them his home mortgage, which they suspect of being a low-rate sweetheart deal offered by a bank that wanted a friend in a high place. Mr. Sessions says that the demand for the mortgage was sprung on him without warning when the investigators were questioning him, and he refused on his lawyers' advice.

There's a lot more. The Justice Department investigators' report devotes more than 30 pages to the history of a wooden fence that either does or does not enhance the security of Mr. Sessions's home. And there's a certain amount of trivia, like the incident in which Mr. and Mrs. Sessions gave two Kirov Ballet dancers a lift out to Wolf Trap—an unreported contact with Soviet nationals, the investigators darkly note.

This inquiry into Mr. Sessions's personal conduct first became public knowledge last fall, at a time when the Justice Department was on the defensive for its management of the Banca Nazionale del Lavoro case. Mr. Sessions had just announced that the FBI would look into the department's handling of a key CIA document when someone, possibly in retaliation, told reporters that Mr. Sessions himself was under scrutiny.

Mr. Sessions is now halfway through a 10-year term. Whether he completes it will have to be resolved by the incoming attorney general—presumably Zoe Baird, who is currently preoccupied with her own legal troubles.